



Religion and Power. Problem of American Theocracies

Review: Maciej Potz, *Teokracje amerykańskie. Źródła i mechanizmy władzy usankcjonowanej religijnie* (“American Theocracies. Sources and Mechanisms of Religiously Sanctioned Power”), Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2016, 395 pp.

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It is not without reason that the United States of America is regarded as the first country to implement the idea of the separation of Church and state. One even refers to a specific American model of the secular state, also described as pure separation. This is a model characterised by the state displaying a certain favour towards religion despite the separation. This is also why the Catholic Church, which before the Second Vatican Council was fundamentally opposed to this type of solution, has been comparatively positive in its response to the American secular state model. Pope Leo XIII, despite firmly rejecting as erroneous the principle of separation of Church and state, in the 1895 encyclical *Longinqua oceani* commended the American constitution and the state authorities' actions regarding the Church as well as the form which the principle of separation of Church and state took in the United States. Yet he also argued that it would be wrong to conclude “that in America is to be sought the type of the most desirable status of the Church, or that it would be universally lawful or expedient for State and Church to be, as in America, dissevered and divorced.”¹ The American model emerged in a unique religious, cultural, ethnic and political context, of course in response to the enormous diversity of confessions and nationalities in the fledgling country built by mostly European migrants. This made it essential to search for solutions that could prevent potential conflicts and also be used to build

¹ *Longinqua*, Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Catholicism in the United States, http://w2.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_06011895_longinqua.html [access: 27.02.2018].

a cohesive state and one American nation. Less obvious is the fact that North America is characterised by state or quasi-state organisms of a religious or theocratic nature. Yet the American colonies – alongside tendencies to break with European heritage and the model of state-church relations dominant in the Old Continent involving a tighter or looser connection, which could be seen in the colonies of Rhode Island or Virginia, for instance – were characterised by attempts to introduce a confessional state model. This topic, about which much less is known and has been written, is the subject of Maciej Potz's book. The first of two parts is theoretical and methodological, and contains four chapters. The author explores issues of political power, with a particular emphasis on the key question of legitimation of power as well as the theocratic system. He also discusses the sacralisation of power and the origins and stability of theocratic power. He initially applies the conception of theocracy outlined in the first part in order to empirically analyse selected North American theocracies – the Puritans, Shakers and Mormons. Given the subject matter as well as the methodology employed, we can classify the book as an example of the political science of religion, which is regarded as a subdiscipline of religious studies or political science, depending on the perspective taken by the researchers in question. While by no means distancing himself from the political science of religion, Potz does note that the research methods used in the book put it in the category of political science, as all elements of the study of religions are subordinated to researching theocracy as a political system. Moreover, he cites his ambition to establish the political science of religion as a fully-fledged subdiscipline of political science (p. 14). Such calls are not new, but previously they have tended to be made by practitioners of religious studies treating the political science of religion as a distinct field of research within their discipline.² In recent years, though, political scientists have increasingly called attention to the need to establish and identify the political science of religion. Of course, one could debate the question of which discipline is the rightful home for such research, but it seems better to leave such problems to one side, as they are academic as well as rather futile exercises. We will always have the problem of such boundaries – as shown by the fact that the sociology of religion is practised both by people calling themselves sociologists and by scholars of religious studies, or also by the similar cases of the psychology of religion and other subdisciplines. Especially in the case of such interdisciplinary fields as political science and religious studies, we will encounter difficulties in classifying research that takes place in the area where they overlap.

The four chapters of the first part are entitled: *Chapter 1. Political Power; Chapter 2. The Concept of Theocracy; Chapter 3. Sacralisation of Power; Chapter 4. The Origins and Stability of Theocratic Power*. The author takes the opportunity to meticulously discuss the basic concepts and terms which he employs in the second,

² See K. Banek: *Politologia religii jako dziedzina badań religioznawczych*, "Przegląd Religioznawczy" 1999, no. 3/4; *Główne problemy politologii religii*, "Nomos. Kwartalnik Religioznawczy" 2001, no. 34/36; B. Grott: *Słowo wstępne* [in:] *Religia i polityka*, B. Grott (ed.), Kraków 2000; *Zamiast wstępu. Religioznawcze aspekty badań nad nowożytnymi nurtami ideowopolitycznymi* [in:] *Religia chrześcijańska a idee polityczne*, B. Grott (ed.), Kraków 1998.

analytical-empirical part. Potz uses an interesting method for arranging his arguments, giving them greater clarity and avoiding potential misunderstandings caused by various interpretations of terms. Following such scholars as Rodney Stark and William S. Bainbridge,³ he quasi-formalises the book with the help of a series of definitions and statements. This process, he argues, allows him to systematise the material, check its internal contradictions and avoid them, and empirically verify the hypotheses he makes by referring them to theocratic systems not discussed in the volume (p. 17). He identifies the primal concepts used for building definitions and claims which he does not define, such as: system, relation, society, religion, etc. The definitions are arbitrary, internally – i.e. within the system – consistent and non-tautological descriptions of studied objects, and, furthermore, are general in character, i.e. pronouncing on a certain class of cases, and formulated in a way that enables them to be falsified (pp. 17–19). All these definitions and statements are presented separately within the course of the narrative and meticulously discussed and justified. As with Stark and Bainbridge, the author also lists them in an appendix. There is no doubt that this theoretical structure makes it easier to understand the hypotheses presented in it, makes the author's arguments clearer and their logic more transparent, and minimises the danger of misunderstandings resulting from the use of specific concepts or their ambiguities. Potz makes use of them in the text in a specific, narrowly defined sense, thereby protecting himself, as it were, from criticisms based on loose application of certain terms or using them in a journalistic or colloquial rather than an academic sense. This is extremely important in the delicate material that Potz covers; as we know, such terms as “authoritarianism,” “totalitarianism,” “theocracy” and “despotism” are often used very loosely, in a way that has little in common with their actual meaning. On the other hand, the question might arise of whether this theoretical section is not too extensive in comparison with the rest of the book. After all, it fills almost half the pages, especially if we discount the indexes, appendices and bibliography. Is such a detailed presentation of lengthy debates over the origin, meanings, characteristics, contents, and legitimisation of power really indispensable? Without doubt, there are also grounds for asking whether it would be more useful to place these reflections more firmly in the context of North American theocracies. Rather than dividing the book into two more or less equal parts, perhaps the more specific theoretical issues might have been woven further into the narrative, thus providing the reader with a greater insight into the author's intentions and adding uniformity to the book. Of course, this is a matter of personal preferences; the author made certain decisions regarding his work's layout and theoretical structure, and is successful in justifying his reasons in the introduction.

The chapters in the first part concerning theocracy, which the author attempts to restore as an analytical category in research on political systems, are particularly useful. He rightly points to the weaknesses of the divisions that are most popular and common in the political sciences – into democratic, authoritarian and totalitarian systems. The problem with this typology is that it confuses two different criteria – procedural (answering the questions “who rules, and how is government established?”)

³ R. Stark, W.S. Bainbridge, *A Theory of Religion*, New Brunswick, NJ 1996.

and liberal (answering the question “what scope of freedom does the government leave to the individual?”). Yet a theocracy cannot be categorically classed in any of these systems, as various theocracies might feature diverse ways of forming the apparatus of power and differing scopes of freedom. For Potz, theocratic government is distinguished by its religious legitimation, which does not necessarily mean that the clergy are in power (a hierocracy). He also points out that theocratic government usually differs from that based on non-religious justifications in terms of subordinate individuals having a higher level of acceptance of the legitimising formula, meaning that the component of legitimation is dominant over that of compulsion (p. 76). As a result, Potz endeavours to integrate theocracy within the theoretical models used for describing political systems, in order for it to be a useful analytical tool. To do this, he proposes constructing a typology of political systems taking three fundamental criteria into account: the procedure for coming to power and exercising it (democracies and autocracies); sources of legitimisation of power (theocratic, traditional, meritocratic, contractual, despotic); and the level of political control or scope of individual freedom (liberal, authoritative, totalitarian). In this way, he identifies some thirty theoretical types of political systems, which are, of course, ideal types. This is certainly an interesting exercise, and above all one that ensures greater conceptual precision than one gets from well-worn existing terms, which today, unfortunately, are used mostly to valorise rather than to describe. It goes without saying that not only do many of Potz’s political systems not have designates in reality, but they are also hard to imagine – such as a traditional totalitarian democracy or a contractual totalitarian autocracy. As the author emphasises, however, this makes it possible to avoid safe but meaningless conceptual clichés like “democracy-freedom” or “autocracy-authoritarianism-despotism,” as there is no “logical, or even historically necessary, link between the way of coming to power and exercising it, the source of its legitimation and the scope of the people’s freedoms” (p. 85). This process allows various types of theocracy to be distinguished, as there is more than one. In individual theocracies, there may be various levels of citizens’ freedoms and diverse ways in which power is taken and exercised. The adjective “theocratic” tells us only about the sources of legitimation of this power, and nothing else. Every theocracy is a confessional state, but the reverse is not true, as the contemporary Western world has a number of confessional states in a modernised version (the United Kingdom, Norway, Denmark),⁴ in which the organisational affiliation of state and Church comes with a contractual, and not religious legitimation of power. Potz also made a typology of theocracies on the basis of the criterion of who governs. He was therefore able to identify hierocracy, in which it is religious functionaries who are in power; papocaesarism, with parallel secular and clerical rule, the former being subordinate to the latter; and caesaropapism, characterised by secular government, but with a significant influence of the clergy and institutional separation – in this case, the government is solely secular, and religious functionaries have no public functions, yet do have a major influence on state affairs (pp. 90–91). In terms of the North American theocracies discussed in the second part of the book, the

⁴ J. Krukowski, *Kościół i państwo. Podstawy relacji prawnych*, Lublin 1993, p. 55.

Mormons and Shakers are part of a hierocratic system, and eighteenth-century Puritan colonies in America are an example of institutional separateness.

The interpretation of theocracy on the basis of social exchange theory is also interesting. Potz shows that the participants of the exchange transaction in a theocracy are on the one hand religious functionaries and the secular rulers who have diverse relations with them, and on the other, subjects who belong to the same religion as the functionaries. The objects of social transactions are various types of religious resources, headed by the promise of salvation, which Stark and Bainbridge called compensators. In this perspective, emphasises Potz, the system of theocracy should be regarded as being of a rational nature. “For the governed, subservience is instrumentally rational, because the rulers are the best providers of the desired resources. In this sense, being subservient to them is not proof of fanaticism or blindness, but rather, firstly, a general belief in the legitimacy of power and the resultant obligations (one should be obedient to rulers), but also, secondly, perceiving the direct dependence of one’s fate, including obtaining religious resources, on obedience” (p. 14). Incidentally, we could also look at this problem from another angle, and try to underline the rational nature of such behaviours. Evolutionary psychology demonstrates clearly that people belonging to a religiously cohesive community have greater chances of survival and producing progeny, and that the ritual practices often perceived as excessively expensive and irrational prove to be the best solution to the problem of cooperation without relatives. As Jonathan Haidt writes:

Our ability to believe in supernatural agents may well have begun as an accidental by-product of a hypersensitive agency detection device, but once early humans began believing in such agents, the groups that used them to construct moral communities were the ones that lasted and prospered. Like those nineteenth-century religious communes, they used their gods to elicit sacrifice and commitment from members. Like those subjects in the cheating studies and trust games, their gods helped them to suppress cheating and increase trustworthiness. Only groups that can elicit commitment and suppress free riding can grow.⁵

Potz analyses the religious doctrines of his selected groups, showing that they are very much functional regarding the political systems based on them, and that they assured political stability and legitimization of leaders’ power. In the case of the Puritans, the religious-political idea of the covenant, with several dimensions – covenant of grace, church covenant and citizens’ covenant – was critical. This served to maintain the cohesion of a community based on a religiously secured worldview. For Mormons, meanwhile, the doctrine of continuous revelation played a strategic role. Unlike the Puritans of New England, who were among the first settlers and essentially had no external enemies, the Mormons faced a powerful foe in the shape of the federal government. Under its pressure, they were forced to abandon an important part of their doctrine, which was polygamy. The doctrine of continual revelation therefore showed its great worth, as they were able to use it to justify this step as well as later about-turns in doctrine, maintain the necessary flexibility, and adapt the system as a result

⁵ J. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*, New York 2013, p. 317.

of external pressures without harm to their legitimacy. Similarly, Mormon millenarianism, proclaiming the need to build God's Kingdom on Earth, was only functional for a certain time, as long as it justified their efforts to migrate and settle Utah. At the point when assimilation with American society became necessary, however, it was abandoned. In the Shakers' case, their non-apocalyptic and non-revolutionary millennialism did not leave them exposed to confrontation with the outside world, and so they were able to function without hindrance, justifying the group's rigorous internal disciplinary rules and its cultural and spatial isolation. In the subsequent chapters of the second part, Potz conducts a similar analysis of the differences in the succession procedures of each group, their evolution and the significance of their various forms for preserving the stability of the system. He then moves on to discuss the institutional dimension of the theocratic political systems created by the Puritans, Mormons and Shakers. Finally, he presents the question of the mechanisms of social control exerted by the government, especially legal regulations and the relevant sanctions. From the point of view of this criterion, he divides the discussed North American theocracies into authoritarian (Puritans, Mormons) and totalitarian (Shakers). Perhaps surprisingly, however, he also strongly emphasises – as we have already seen – that legitimised power is dominant over forms based on coercion. This is best seen with the example of the “totalitarian” Shakers, whose leaders *de facto* had no physical sanctions at their disposal, and yet succeeded in maintaining a surprising amount of group cohesion in terms of belief, conduct and aspirations. This was achieved by specifying in minute detail all obligations, permitted behaviours, rules of personal hygiene, breakdown of daily life, dress code and rules for furnishing a home, and giving them religious status, as well as by isolation from the outside world. As Tomasz Żyro writes, in this type of utopian community, the individual does not see the need

[...] to go looking for and revealing instincts, asocial inclinations. In a utopian community, the essence of control is contained in the very social structure it establishes. A secondary role here was played by controlling the community member's behaviour, time and space. A fixed daily routine, regularity of meals and rest pack experiences into a peaceful rhythm of enduring, far removed from the savage events “on the outside.” Isolation from the world facilitated the emergence of a time of internal utopia, completely different from the social time. [...] Even more capable was the imposition on the community member of a sense of collective space. [...] For ordinary sect members, it was practically only the internal space that existed: they seldom received permission to go beyond the community (moving only in pairs). As a result, the natural community for a believer was a space organised according to doctrine. This alienation, deliberate isolation and sense of mission were guaranteed by original outfits, secret language and secret names known only to a few.⁶

In conclusion, Maciej Potz's book is an extremely valuable, and, in many respects, pioneering work. The author tackles a whole array of problems which have not previously attracted the interest of researchers in Polish literature or have only been a marginal concern. By this, I mean in particular the conception of theocracy that he outlines and the attempt – successfully, in my opinion – to demonstrate that this can be a useful analytical category for researchers of the links between religion

⁶ T. Żyro, *Boża plantacja. Historia utopii amerykańskiej*, Warszawa 1994, pp. 158–159.

and the state and political power, which has extremely rarely been used. What seems useful in this sense is the demystification of certain concepts such as “theocracy,” which all too often today tend to be used as kinds of keywords or valorising concepts. Equally worthwhile is the identification of several types of theocracy, which shows that there is no such thing as theocracy *per se*. Various versions are in operation, with diverse ways of creating the apparatus of power and varying levels of state control over the life of the individual. This can all be useful – and not only for political scientists or religious studies scholars of a historical bent, analysing previous theocratic systems. As Potz rightly explains in the conclusion, nowadays too, mostly in the Muslim world, there are diverse theocracies which ought to be the subject of acute interest from researchers. The author also convincingly shows that in certain conditions, a theocracy can constitute a rational choice, i.e. guarantee the realisation of the objectives set by the community, fulfilling a state-forming role, providing cohesion to a specific group, and giving tools with which it is able to effectively oppose other rival doctrines. It therefore fulfils a functional role in a given community, and should not be treated solely in terms of an aberration or eruption of fanaticism. Purely from the point of view of religious studies, this book certainly fills gaps in the Polish subject literature on American puritanism (although the relatively largest amount of literature can be found on this movement), Mormonism, and, especially, Shakerism. There is almost no Polish literature on the Shakers, apart from a few fragmentary works. As for Mormonism, more literature exists, but unfortunately most publications have an ideological stamp and do not fulfil the criteria for objective scientific works. Finally, the book’s value is increased by its extremely clear and the author’s, let us say, elegant style and presentation. It is a transparent, coherent and eloquent argument, which brings order to many previously under-researched issues and clarifies a number of popular yet stereotypical, and often even jarringly banal views. This is certainly a scientifically mature, intellectually competent work, which penetrates and irons out an important set of issues that unfortunately are often “wrongly” presented in the Polish subject literature.

Translated by Ben Koschalka